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Activities not classified by field: coordination of development indicators in the context of the follow-up to United Nations conferences and summits

Activities and plans of the United Nations Statistics Division and the Statistical Commission in support of the harmonization and rationalization of indicators

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

The present report was prepared at the request of the Statistical Commission at its thirty-first session.[1] It contains an update on the indicator debate at the substantive session of 2000 of the Economic and Social Council in July 2000 and on the subsequent Council resolution (see annex I). The report describes the activities of the United Nations Statistics Division in support of the implementation of that Council resolution. These activities, inter ail, focus on developing an agreed process to rationalize and harmonize the various sets of conference indicators and on strengthening national capacity to produce relevant indicators for policy decision-making. As the Council has invited the Commission to take a lead role in acting as its technical advisory body on indicators and has requested a progress report on this topic for its substantive session in 2002, this report contains a proposed action plan for the period 2001-2002 (see annex II). Points for discussion are contained in paragraph 18.

[1] See *Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, 2000, Supplement No. 4* (E/2000/24, para. 1).

* E/CN.3/2001/1.

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I. Update on recent developments regarding conference indicators

1. At its substantive session of 2000, in July, the Economic and Social Council reiterated its interest in the topic of statistical indicators to follow up major United Nations conferences and summits held in the 1990s ("conference indicators"). After extensive discussions, the Council adopted resolution 2000/27, the text of which is contained in annex I of the present report. This resolution reaffirms the recommendations contained in an earlier resolution on indicators (Council resolution 1999/55 of 30 July 1999, sect. II) and takes up many of its themes. For example, the resolution calls for coordinated efforts by donors and international organizations in support of statistical capacity-building, and emphasizes the need for networking among international organizations to limit the number of common indicators in order to lessen the burden on Member States. However, the new resolution reflects a concern on the part of the Council about the speed of progress in this area when it urges the United Nations Statistics Division to accelerate the promotion of networking among national and international institutions. The Council requested the Secretary-General to report on the implementation of resolution 2000/27 at its substantive session of 2002.

2. The discussions leading up to the resolution clarified that the Economic and Social Council is concerned about three elements: (a) an integrated and coordinated follow-up to all conferences; (b) a balanced approach to monitoring conference commitments; and (c) a need for full participation and ownership of Member States.

3. With respect to the issue of integration and coordination, the Council invited all the functional commissions to review the reports of the other functional commissions, and their multi-year programmes of work, and to examine implications of forthcoming special events and years (see E/CN.3/2001/15 and E/CN.3/2001/L.5). As statistics and indicators are needed for all areas, they are regarded as an important integrating tool.

4. With respect to the balanced approach to monitoring conference commitments, the Economic and Social Council noted the progress achieved in developing basic indicators in developing countries. At the same time, it stressed the need to further develop indicators on means of implementation to evaluate progress towards conference goals in creating an enabling environment. Developed countries pledged to support developing countries' efforts to achieve conference goals in terms of both technical and financial support, and by working towards trade liberalization, enhanced financial stability and improved cooperation in the formulation of macroeconomic policies.

5. The third concern mentioned in paragraph 2 above entails the need for full participation and ownership of Member States in all stages of indicator development. These stages include conceptual and definitional development as well as provision of data. It is in this context that the Economic and Social Council turns to the Statistical Commission as its authoritative technical advisory body. In paragraphs 8 and 9 of its resolution 2000/27, the Council makes explicit reference to the Commission (see annex I). The Council is looking to the Commission to provide leadership in the field of conference indicators. The Secretariat suggests to the Commission that it consider three specific undertakings to provide the requested leadership. First, the Commission should conduct an in-depth technical analysis of existing conference indicators, including their statistical properties and their impact on national statistical programmes; second, it should make a recommendation regarding a limited list of development indicators; and third, it should develop and recommend to the Council a mechanism of statistical review for future proposed indicators. Section III contains detailed proposals on how this could be done.

II. Current United Nations Statistics Division activities in support of harmonization and rationalization of indicators

6. The United Nations Statistics Division continued to work with the United Nations Development Group (UNDG) on the implementation of the indicator framework for the common country assessment (CCA) indicators. The 57 indicators of the CCA indicator framework cover all development sectors and are currently being used by United Nations country teams across the world to describe the national development situations. To better understand the impact on national

statistical systems of the requirements of the CCA indicator framework, the United Nations Statistics Division experts visited Cameroon, Turkmenistan, Viet Nam and Lebanon, to assess the quality and completeness of the CCA indicator framework in these countries. The United Nations Statistics Division is also working with UNDG on a general evaluation of the experiences in 37 countries that have used the CCA indicator framework since its formulation in April 1999. The results of this analysis will be presented to the joint session of the Executive Boards of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the World Food Programme (WFP) in January 2001 and will be available to the Statistical Commission as a background paper.

7. In general, it can be said that the work on the CCA indicator framework in countries has led to improved dialogue and partnerships between national users and producers of development information and the United Nations country teams. For many indicators data are still lacking or are outdated. In this context, the United Nations Statistics Division is documenting good practices where the statement of data gaps has led to renewed efforts of United Nations country teams to strengthen statistical capacity in countries.

8. The United Nations Statistics Division indicator web site presents information on metadata on indicators disseminated by the organizations of the United Nations system in the context of conference follow-up. The web site contains the following information for each indicator: definition, related conference, data collection and dissemination mechanisms. At the thirty-fourth session of the Administrative Committee on Coordination (ACC) Subcommittee on Statistical Activities, the United Nations Statistics Division presented to its United Nations partners a simplified and redesigned format of the web site. There is now a fully searchable relational database underlying the web site. The information relating to the four initial participating organizations (the United Nations Statistics Division, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the International Labour Organization (ILO)) has been adapted to the new format and a network of technical experts in all United Nations organizations has been organized.

9. Recognizing the fundamental importance of strong national statistical systems (see also E/CN.3/2001/24, annex, prepared by the consortium known as the Partnership in Statistics for Development in the Twenty-first Century (PARIS 21), the United Nations Statistics Division has continued to support countries and regions in building their statistical capacity. There are three main vehicles that the United Nations Statistics Division uses in driving towards this objective. The United Nations Statistics Division continues its long-standing partnership with UNFPA in improving population statistics, particularly in the areas of the decennial census and civil registration and vital statistics. Despite financial difficulties, UNFPA continues to demonstrate its commitment in these areas. The second avenue is the United Nations Statistics Division's regular programme for technical cooperation. This provides for one interregional adviser in national accounts and one in informatics. Training workshops conducted in this biennium covered issues such as trade statistics (Latin America and Southern African countries), national accounts (Africa, Western Asia), dissemination and marketing of statistics as well as operation of statistical organizations (Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) countries), civil registration and vital statistics (Latin America), classification (Africa), disability statistics (Africa) and population and housing censuses (global). The third vehicle comprises the United Nations Development Accounts. The United Nations Statistics Division has two currently in operation, one with the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) countries and one with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations) (ASEAN) countries. A third programme has been recently approved in cooperation with the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA).

III. Proposed work plan for the period 2001-2002

10. It is proposed that the United Nations Statistics Division continue with its activities as described in section II above. Moreover, in order to comply with the Economic and Social Council's specific request for a report on indicators in 2002, the United Nations Statistics Division has elaborated a work plan for the

preparation of such a report, which is contained in annex II.

11. The activities outlined for the Statistical Commission in paragraph 5 above will require a considerable amount of technical work. The United Nations Statistics Division is of course committed to its responsibility as secretariat of the Commission. However, as one of the key concerns of the Economic and Social Council was country ownership of indicators, it is crucial to incorporate the technical knowledge and expertise of national statistical institutions into the process of preparing the next report to the Council commissioned for 2002. It is therefore proposed that the Commission approve the formation of a "Friends of the Chair advisory group on indicators". This network of national experts would be committed to providing feedback on technical material sent by the United Nations Statistics Division during 2001 and to meeting once to review and finalize the document to be submitted to the Commission at its 2002 session. Since the list of international indicators covers the entire range of human activities, it is recognized that no one group of experts can be expected to be knowledgeable in all areas. Therefore, it is recommend that the Friends of the Chair function as a group that would take the responsibility not necessarily for serving as the technical experts themselves but rather for finding the right experts.

12. To conduct the technical evaluation of the conference indicators, it is suggested that the statistical properties of the indicators be described in a matrix-type format. As a first step, the United Nations Statistical Division would present to the Statistical Commission as a background document a list of conference indicators. This list would be compiled in cooperation with the respective secretariats of United Nations conferences and summits. It would contain all indicators that had been explicitly mentioned in the conference documents or that had been identified subsequently by the secretariats as relevant indicators for measuring progress towards the respective conference goals. It may be expected that this list would contain several hundred conference indicators.

13. The second matrix dimension for the technical description of conference indicators would contain important technical attributes for each of the conference indicators. A preliminary proposal upon which the views of the Statistical Commission are sought contains the following elements:

(a) Conference relation;

(b) Policy concern (possibility of proxies);

(c) Definition (including required periodicity);

(d) Characteristics of national data collection (including methodologies used, cost, quality, timeliness);

(e) Approval by an intergovernmental body;

(f) Ongoing international data collection (if any);

(g) Availability of recent data;

(h) Global applicability;

(i) Reference for further information (publication, web page).

14. If the Statistical Commission agrees with this format, the technical inputs from the various United Nations agencies will be sought over the next months. The information already contained in the United Nations Statistics Division indicator web site is expected to be useful in this context. The Division will aim at sending to the Friends of the Chair advisory group on indicators a matrix pre-filled with as much information as possible by June 2001. The advisory group would then be invited to comment on the validity of the indicator descriptions and assist as needed in the completion of the matrix. As the list of indicators will contain elements from all development sectors (economy, environment, social and demographic sphere), it may in this context be useful if the members of the advisory group agree on a certain division of labour. An expert group meeting, planned for September 2001, would then finalize the matrix, on the basis of which the United Nations Statistics Division could subsequently prepare the document for the session of the Statistical Commission in 2002. After the Commission formally endorses the technical description of the conference indicators, it will be submitted to the Economic and Social Council at its substantive session of 2002.

15. With respect to the recommendation of a limited list of indicators, the Statistical Commission seems to have basically three options. *Option 1*: The Commission, seeing itself as unable to make any recommendation in respect of a specific list to the Economic and Social Council, could limit itself to transmitting the technical evaluation of all conference indicators, which would contain some indications of the relative strengths and weaknesses of the various

indicators. This would avoid a difficult selection process, but it might not satisfy the Council, in particular as the Council is concerned about the overburdening of countries. *Option 2*: Instead of defining a new core set, the Commission could choose one existing set, and critically review and build upon it. Potential candidates for such an approach would be the Minimum National Social Data Set (MNSDS), the CCA indicator framework or the core list of 58 sustainable development indicators elaborated by the Commission on Sustainable Development. The CCA indicator framework is broadest in terms of conference coverage, but it lacks the legitimacy of early country involvement. The general advantage of building upon an existing list is that important previous work would be incorporated into the effort and the risk of discrepancies between existing lists and a new Statistical Commission list would be reduced. *Option 3*: The Statistical Commission could develop and recommend its own limited list.

16. In order to address the issue of a limited list of indicators, a set of criteria for the selection of recommended indicators will be needed. The following set of criteria is proposed for the Statistical Commission's consideration: (a) ability of the indicators to measure the main conference goals and to respond quickly to changes; (b) cost-effectiveness, including the infrastructure needed for regular compilation; (c) availability of data for a sufficient number of countries; (d) degree of independence of the indicators in the limited set. Based on the discussion at the 2001 session of the Commission, it is suggested that the United Nations Statistics Division would work closely with the Friends of the Chair advisory group on indicators to formulate a specific recommendation to be adopted by the Commission at its 2002 session.

17. Finally, it is likely that new development issues will arise, and subsequently, that international goals will be agreed upon and measures for progress needed. The Statistical Commission needs to determine the degree to which it wants to be proactive, by suggesting to the Economic and Social Council a mechanism for statistical review of future proposed indicators. The format of the technical evaluation of currently used indicators, which was discussed above (paras. 12-13), could provide a model for such a mechanism. The Commission could volunteer to undertake at its future sessions a continued review of indicators by adding newly proposed indicators to the evaluation matrix discussed above.

IV. Points for discussion

18. The Statistical Commission may wish to address the following questions:

(a) Does the Commission agree with the interpretation of the United Nations Statistics Division regarding the work that is expected of the Commission by the Economic and Social Council?

(b) Does the Commission agree with the proposed work programme of the United Nations Statistics Division in support of the implementation of the Economic and Social Council resolutions? In particular, does the Commission approve the formation of a "Friends of the Chair advisory group", to be appointed by the Chairman of the Statistical Commission, to technically validate the conference indicators, to elaborate recommendations for a limited list of indicators and to make proposals for a mechanism of statistical review of future indicators? The group will be expected to present its findings to the Statistical Commission at its next session for approval.

Annex I

Economic and Social Council resolution 2000/27 of 28 July 2000 entitled "Basic indicators for the integrated and coordinated implementation of and follow-up to major United Nations conferences and summits at all levels"

The Economic and Social Council,

Recalling its decision 1998/290 of 31 July 1998 on basic indicators for the integrated and coordinated implementation of and follow-up to the major United Nations conferences and summits in the economic, social and related fields and section II of its resolution 1999/55 of 30 July 1999 on integrated and coordinated implementation of and follow-up to major United Nations conferences and summits,

1. *Takes note* of the report of the Secretary-General on progress on basic indicators for the integrated and coordinated implementation of and follow-up to major United Nations conferences and summits at all levels;[a]

2. *Reaffirms* the important role that the functional commissions play in the integrated and coordinated follow-up to and evaluation of the implementation of the outcome of major United Nations conferences and summits;

3. *Also reaffirms* the recommendations contained in section II of its resolution 1999/55 and the importance of national efforts to build statistical capacity in all countries, including through statistical training, and of effective international support in this context for developing countries;

4. *Urges* countries, the United Nations funds and programmes, the Secretariat, bilateral funding agencies, the Bretton Woods institutions and regional funding agencies to work closely together to implement these recommendations and to mobilize the required resources and coordinate their efforts to support national statistical capacity-building in developing countries, in particular in least developed countries;

5. *Emphasizes* that the indicators used by the Secretariat in the context of the coordinated and integrated implementation of and follow-up to major United Nations conferences and summits should be developed with the full participation of all countries and approved by the relevant intergovernmental bodies;

6. *Calls upon* the United Nations funds and programmes, functional and regional commissions and specialized agencies to keep under review the full range of indicators used in their reports and information networks with full participation and ownership of Member States, with a view to avoiding duplication, as well as ensuring the transparency, consistency and reliability of these indicators;

7. *Requests* the executive boards of the United Nations funds and programmes, with the support of the Statistics Division of the Secretariat, to review as a matter of urgency the common country assessment indicator frameworks and report thereon to the Council at its substantive session of 2001;

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[a] E/2000/60.

8. *Invites* the Statistical Commission to serve as the intergovernmental focal point for the review of the indicators used by the United Nations system for the integrated and coordinated implementation of and follow-up to major United Nations conferences and summits at all levels, and the methodologies employed in formulating them, including in the context of the elaboration of the common country assessment, and to make recommendations with a view to facilitating future consideration by the Council;

9. *Reiterates its invitation* to the Statistical Commission, with the assistance of the Statistics Division and in close cooperation with other relevant bodies of the United Nations system, including the Administrative Committee on Coordination, and, as appropriate, other relevant international organizations, to review, with a view to facilitating future consideration by the Council, the work undertaken in harmonizing and rationalizing basic indicators in the context of the follow-up to United Nations conferences and summits, taking fully into account the decisions taken in other functional and regional commissions and, in that process, to identify a limited number of common indicators from among those currently accepted and widely used by the States Members of the United Nations, in order to lessen the data provision burden on Member States, bearing in mind the work done so far in this area;

10. *Stresses* the need further to develop indicators on means of implementation to evaluate progress towards conference goals in creating an enabling environment for development;

11. *Urges* the Secretariat, in particular the Statistics Division, to accelerate with the support of the Subcommittee on Statistical Activities of the Administrative Committee on Coordination the promotion of networking among national and international institutions in the area of statistics and in the development and application of indicators agreed to in the relevant intergovernmental bodies relating to the follow-up to the United Nations conferences and summits, in the context of its role as the focal point in the United Nations system in this regard, as well as to facilitate the exchange of relevant information and metadata between the United Nations system and Member States;

12. *Requests* the Secretary-General to prepare a progress report on the implementation of section II of resolution 1999/55 and the present resolution, for consideration by the Council at its substantive session of 2002.

Annex II

Proposed action plan for the period 2001-2002

December 2000-January 2001

In close cooperation with the secretariats responsible for conference follow-up, the United Nations Statistics Division will compile a "long list" of development indicators used in the context of conference follow-up. This list will be presented to the Statistical Commission at its session in 2001 as a background document.

March 2001

Statistical Commission to endorse action plan.

Formation of a "Friends of the Chair advisory group" (if possible short briefing of potential members of the group during the Commission session); discussion about leader of the groups of Friends of the Chair; suggestion: individual friends will be focal points for specific sectors (for example, economic, environmental, social, demographic, institutional indicators).

United Nations Statistics Division to solicit technical information/description on all indicators from various secretariats of United Nations conferences.

April 2001

Informal briefing of Economic and Social Council members on progress and decisions taken by the Statistical Commission at its session in 2001.

June 2001

United Nations Statistics Division to circulate to Friends of the Chair a first draft of the matrix, containing the long list of indicators and their technical evaluation. Friends of the Chair will review matrix with their sector specialists, and provide the United Nations Statistics Division with comments by August 2001.

September 2001

Three-day expert group meeting of Friends of the Chair (and other relevant sector specialists) in New York. Objective is to (a) finalize the matrix; (b) formulate a recommendation from the Statistical Commission to the Economic and Social Council regarding the limited list of indicators; and (c) suggest a mechanism for future review of future proposed indicators.

Administrative Committee on Coordination (ACC) Subcommittee on Statistical Activities meets in Vienna; to be informed about results of expert group meeting.

Informal briefing of Economic and Social Council members on progress and decisions taken by expert group meeting.

November 2001

United Nations Statistics Division to prepare document for the 2002 session of the Statistical Commission based on discussions at expert group meeting and ACC Subcommittee on Statistical Activities.

January and February 2002

United Nations Statistical Division to prepare first draft of the report to the Economic and Social Council to be circulated at the 2002 session of the Statistical Commission as a background document.

March 2002

The Statistical Commission at its 2002 session to adopt technical evaluation of conference indicators; to present recommendations regarding the limited list of indicators; and to suggest a mechanism for future review of future proposed indicators.

Following the 2002 session of the Statistical Commission, the United Nations Statistics Division, in close consultation with Friends of the Chair (and other relevant sector specialists), to finalize report to the Economic and Social Council based on the decisions of the Commission at its 2002 session.

April 2002

Submission of report to the Economic and Social Council.